

‘The National Automobile Slum’

*James Howard Kunstler on Cities,
Architecture, and Planning in the U.S.*

EDITOR'S NOTE: James Howard Kunstler spoke at the Weiss Symposium in April on “The National Automobile Slum as America’s Public Realm.” The following is an excerpt from a question and answer session that followed his talk. The questions are from people in attendance, and have been paraphrased.

The problems and solutions you discuss seem to be primarily matters of urban design. Another side to that point is economic development. One could argue that good urban design costs more. Would you address the problem of developers who would go elsewhere when they are faced with rules and regulations that make them build things that cost more?

KUNSTLER: Well I would ask you to consider this. You look back at American history and look at the wonderful places we were able to create in earlier times. Go look at the quadrangle at the college of Charleston, or some of your better ensembles here at Chapel Hill. Look at your 1906 fire houses, and your 1880 school buildings and your 1912 hospitals and ask yourself, was that a less affluent society than ours? Well by a far sight they were less wealthy than our society yet their standards would not permit them to build crummy buildings.

The fact of the matter is one of the great subtexts of the modernist

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movement, both in practice and in schools, has been to create a rationale for builders to build the crummiest, cheapest building possible over the last 50 years, to create an intellectual framework in which that's OK. There's a point where we have to draw the line and say it's not OK to just put up cinderblock buildings anymore. We need to live in places that are spiritually rewarding. And believe me this is going to be a major stumbling point. Americans do not believe that towns can be spiritually gratifying communities.

And it's your job to prove we can accomplish that. And if we don't we'll never solve these problems. The only way we're going to get people to accept anything other than a cartoon of a country is to create towns that are deeply gratifying and rewarding to be in. This is a cultural problem, not an economic problem. It is the culture of quantification that is fogging your mind to make you think this is merely an economic problem it is culture, culture, culture and culture.

How much are the age of the automobile and the love affair with the car related to the decline of architecture in America?

KUNSTLER: Obviously I think it's had a catastrophic effect in the way we've chosen to use it. Anyone who thinks that we're going to be driving around 25 years the way we have been ought to have their head examine. There are many things that could happen. One of the most obvious things is that at any given moment, the overwhelming majority of cars in America are sitting in storage, in parking lots or parked along streets. If we could just get to a situation where we just had vehicles circulating, not sitting in parking lots, that would be great. And it's possible to do that. The ability to do that is not beyond us.

The Europeans already have some interesting arrangements. They have these things called car clubs where for about a thousand bucks a year, you can join this organization, they have a lot near you. When you need a car, you go take one. You have a

key to a certain box that has the car keys in it, and you take whatever vehicle you need, whether it's pickup truck or a little touring car. And the benefit is you don't have to take care of the car, maintain it, you don't have to worry about insurance, any of that stuff. And you pay less per year than if you owned the car and you don't have to worry about where you park it or store it. And the fact of the matter is, Americans on average, just to be quantitative for a moment, it is estimated that it costs 6,000 bucks a

year for the average American to have a car. For \$6,000 a year you could rent a Lexus every weekend and still go on an excursion every weekend and still have enough money left over to go to Paris for two weeks. The amount of money we're wasting just on car ownership itself is kind of repugnant.

So I also think what we're going to see is we're going to witness the dis-democratization of the car. What we've seen over the last 75 years is the democ-

ratization of the car, the mass ownership and use of the car. I think that more and more the car is going to be something that only the well off can afford. As we develop a greater gap between the people who are doing OK and those who are not doing OK that we're going to see a greater gap between car owners and those who don't own a car. And believe me the people who are not car owners who are stuck living in a car dependent suburban wasteland, are going to be really angry and they are going to express themselves politically by voting for maniacs. And we're going to be in a lot of trouble unless we make accommodations for people who are going to have less and are not able to drive their own cars.

I don't understand everything you're saying about architecture. Do you think there's a place for modern, innovative architecture?

KUNSTLER: I think the whole idea of innovative architecture, except for a lot of esoteric questions....

is a phony matter of estheticism that has been masquerading as creativity and innovation and has been sold to you folks that way by the mandarins of the university. But it is really (wrong). We probably don't need a lot of new forms. What we need is just for starters to gain enough expertise in dealing with the forms that are already understood and emulating the forms that have already existed so we can start again from that point. No I think it's really oversold. And one of the hallmarks is this, the need to be creative is also prone to the need to create buildings that stand by themselves, not buildings that define space, or buildings that share space, but buildings that just occupy space. The result of it is object buildings that don't relate to the objects around it. If there's one thing we don't need any more of is narcissistic object buildings by narcissistic egomaniacal architects that exist for nothing more than to exist in space and glorify their creativity. In fact I think it can be genuinely said that architecture is a field which right can benefit so much from less creativity than from more creativity that it's not funny.

New Urbanism stresses creating a livable environment, but the movement does not necessarily allow for the crud such as manufacturing. Do you see a way that these communities can responsibly accommodate less desirable uses such as manufacturing?

KUNSTLER: I don't view New Urbanism just as a movement for building new towns, TNDs, PUDs and new subdivisions. I view it as simply an effort to reform civic design and restore it to our culture. There probably will continue to be good reasons to separate some uses. We're literally not going to want to have steel stamping plants in a residential neighborhood; this is self-evident. But I think one of the points that has been made by people like Peter (Calthorpe) and Andres Duany is that there are an awful lot of activities which simply are not as obnoxious as they used to be, they are now compatible.

And I think another thing is, along with the reduced economies of scale of our activities of the

21st century, and the fact that a lot of people will be working at home in a new relationship to their home, the organization of work will be quite different than what it's been in the last 150 years of the industrial age. Remember the industrial age is really a social-technological revolution that the world never saw before, and we didn't really know how that would

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play out.... So the way that human societies organize work and organize themselves can change drastically, and I think it will change drastically in the next century. So I think our cities will have much different texture, quality and shape, and a lot of them will be a lot better if we're lucky.

Do you see growth management strategies, such as Smart Growth in Maryland, playing a role in bringing about better urban design?

KUNSTLER: I view the term growth management as being symptomatic of the confusion Americans are feeling about what's happening. The fact of the matter is places like Chapel Hill and places all over the country could have enormous amounts of development within their boundaries, and in their downtowns. American towns are full of desolation and underutilized parcels. So the idea that we need to stop it, that we need to stop development... one of the things that I recommend is that we stop using the word "growth" and start using the term "economic activity."

The word "growth" has all these (connotations) like cancer, malignancy. Chapel Hill has 'growth.' Let's go get an MRI for Chapel Hill. It's possible to have a lot of economic activity without necessarily smearing the civic amenity of the town over the countryside.

I know that in my hometown of Saratoga, a population of 29,000, we have portions of our down-

town, and various superblocks that have been urban renewed where you can fit the entire city of Siena, Italy, just in that one little corner of town. And I don't know what it will take. I do think it will take a shock to the system for people to realize the opportunities are there.

Probably the most important thing you can do in your towns, aside from reestablishing the normality of the building block, is to do everything possible to promote residential development downtown and in town of every type of building. You have got to have rich people living in town. All over America the wealthy will not live in the city. They will only occupy the leafy suburbs. The political progressives I think are confused about that. We have a war against gentrification. Gentrification is a dirty word, but unfortunately if you are against gentrification it immediately puts you in a philosophical position of being against fixing up anything in the town and it says essentially people who are well off are morally restricted to life in the suburbs. And so if you take that position ... So I think that progressives have got to reexamine some of their positions to get their heads straight.

A lot of people worry that when you make cities more desirable to live in you restrict lower income people to the suburbs. I was wondering if you could speak to the necessity of socioeconomic diversity in cities.

KUNSTLER: Most of the problems of affordable housing in America are self-afflicted. We have created an artificial problem that now needs an artificial solution, which is a commodity called affordable housing. And the main reason it happens is

we've outlawed all the normal forms of affordable housing. For 50 years we haven't built apartments over stores. For 50 years all of our commercial development and building has come in the form of one-story buildings in the middle of parking lagoons. And 50 years later, since we didn't build it in the first place, none of it is getting older, and hence more affordable, because in the normal course of things affordable housing is the housing that is old.

In most residential American neighborhoods we have outlawed accessory apartments and outbuildings. This is also customarily the abode of people who made less money and they were distributed equitably around the town in different neighborhoods behind the alleys and behind the houses, and we have to make it legal again. What you'll find is the political progressives are all for open space and green space, but the first time somebody suggests that they allow accessory apartments in the neighborhood they call their lawyers and start a NIMBY war, and reveal themselves to be the hypocrites that they are.

We decided (in establishing zoning) that shopping was an obnoxious industrial activity that people shouldn't be able to live around. And by making that fundamental decision we made it impossible to assemble the urban pattern that had been followed by everybody in the rest of the world. So we're going to have to revisit that fundamental principle and change it. But I do think that we've got to make it OK for the wealthy to be part of our town. Because the welfare of our town, the future of our town has to be the responsibility of all classes, not just the poor, not just the victims, but the well off, the employed, the gainfully occupied, the responsible, and even the rich drunks, have to be responsible. ☐